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Draft report

Addendum

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III. Improving the performance of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

Introduction and overview

1. At its 466th meeting, on 19 September 2005, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/60/112). In introducing the report, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management said that the Department had been striving to further rationalize the workflow and to enhance synergies, notably by managing the calendar of conferences and meetings in a more rational way, synchronizing translation capacity with expected output and enhancing accountability in all of the Department's operations. Efforts had also been made to address the specific concerns of Member States, as evidenced by the more timely issuance of the summary records of the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly and the provision of detailed information on the submission of pre-session documents by substantive departments. The momentum of reform had been maintained and new projects had been initiated. One example was the pilot project undertaken by the Central Planning and Coordination Service and the Documentation Division. In the first phase, the Central Planning and Coordination Service had estimated the expected use of each translation service for consecutive three-month periods. That estimate had then been used by the translation services as the basis for their capacity planning. However, as the reforms proceeded, it had become more and more clear that there were external factors beyond the control of the Department and that the Committee could play a significant role in addressing those factors.

2. The Under-Secretary-General said that he wished to draw the Committee's attention to three points in particular. First, since the Department's four goals of

quality, productivity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness were not fully compatible, and could even be mutually conflicting, it was essential that they be properly prioritized. In the early stages of the reform process, when the Department had focused on eliminating expenditures through better planning, it had achieved a notable reduction in the use of temporary assistance and overtime. It had then moved on to improving timeliness and subsequently to raising overall output, all within available resources. In that process, the improvement of quality presented a constant challenge. The Department would welcome the Committee's guidance, bearing in mind that progress in the achievement of one goal might mean sacrifice in the achievement of another. The question of summary records illustrated the kind of quandary sometimes faced by the Department. It was now clear that the Department did not have the human and financial resources to process all summary records in-house and on time. Processing the records through contractual translation, however, involved a rather long turnaround time. If summary records for all of the intergovernmental bodies entitled to them were required in a shorter time frame, in-house translation and other capacities would have to be strengthened, with significant financial implications. A decision by the Committee on that question was urgently needed. Second, the Department was sometimes confronted with different mandates from different intergovernmental bodies. It therefore appeared necessary for the Committee, which was the only intergovernmental body with an oversight role in conference management, to ensure greater coherence in the mandates on documentation, as it did in the area of meetings planning.

3. Third, mandates should strike a balance between the desirable and the practical. Of particular interest in that context was the "six-week rule" for document issuance. While document users wanted to receive documents as early as possible, author departments wished to incorporate the most up-to-date information and input from Member States, and must therefore balance quality and coverage against timeliness. For its part, the Department must juggle with the mandate of six-week issuance, on the one hand, and the need to avoid issuing documents less than one week before the date of their consideration, on the other. From a practical viewpoint, there was a trade-off between maximizing "six-week rule" issuances or minimizing issuances of less than one week. Experience showed that issuing documents four weeks before their consideration while minimizing less-than-one-week issuances might be the best combination, and the Secretariat would welcome guidance from the Committee in that regard. The Department had been proactive in taking up the mandate assigned by the General Assembly on the control and limitation of documentation by enforcing page limits and drafting guidelines set by the Assembly. Starting in 2006, the Department would aggressively slot both the submission date and the anticipated length of all pre-session documents. The support and guidance of the Committee in those efforts would be welcome.

Discussion

Dynamic conference management

4. It was suggested that, of the Department's four goals (quality, quantity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness), only two, quality and timeliness, were ends in themselves. It was the Department's function to provide quality services in a timely fashion; increasing productivity and economizing on costs were merely means of achieving those ends and should not be the final determinants of policy. However, it

was pointed out that at different times the Department had been instructed by General Assembly resolutions to pursue all of those goals simultaneously; even quality and timeliness could entail a certain trade-off. In response to questions about the phases of reform that had already been completed, the representative of the Secretariat detailed a number of structural and operational changes. In terms of operating methods, he referred to the slotting system for documentation, the mechanism of page-limit waivers, eMeets, electronic referencing and electronic document flow as being just some of the innovations introduced in the past three years.

Meetings management

5. In answer to questions, the Committee was assured that staff loans from one duty station to another to help balance out peaks and valleys in meeting loads was an ongoing practice. It was explained that the new APG software for interpreter assignment did not affect the choice of interpreters for a given meeting. Assignment problems might arise when there was an overlap in demand for a certain expertise.

Document management

6. One Committee member pointed out that the introduction of information and communication technologies in document processing could be expected to have an impact on three of the four goals (quantity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness) and wondered whether the limits of the benefits of the technologies had yet been reached. The representative of the Secretariat said that, surprisingly, thus far the greatest impact had been on quality, in the form of greater consistency of terminology in documents. Keyboarding by translators had not proved faster than dictation, although it had downstream benefits. On the other hand, printing on-demand had resulted in considerable savings. Unfortunately, some technologies were not available for certain languages. Delegations requested an overview of where the technologies had been found to improve production and where problems had been encountered.

7. Some members felt that the document slotting system should be made more flexible and looked forward to hearing the results of the pilot self-evaluation project on the effectiveness of the slotting system conducted with the help of the Office of Internal Oversight Services and the participation of author departments.

Transparency and accountability

8. Noting that much of the section on transparency and accountability dealt with the accountability of author departments for document submission, delegations asked how such accountability was enforced. It was explained that when a document was late, it must contain an explanatory footnote by the author department setting out the reasons for the delay in its submission. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions had put forward a proposal to make the submission of documents on time and within page limits a performance indicator for author departments within the context of results-based budgeting. In addition, the Department itself had compiled statistics on compliance in the submission of pre-session documents, which could be found in the annex to the above-mentioned report of the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department.

9. A number of Committee members felt that since the needs of intergovernmental bodies might change from year to year the necessity of providing adequate information for decision-making should be the guiding principle in setting document length. The representative of the Secretariat recalled that the Department had the flexibility to provide waivers of page limits and that negotiations on document length and timing were ongoing, not only with author departments but also with committee secretaries. The Department maintained its position that a waiver given one year should not automatically be taken as an entitlement the next year.

10. On being asked how the Department's own accountability could be evaluated, it was explained that, as an author department, it was subject to the same rules as others and that, as a processing department, it was responsible for a four-week turnaround time. If it appeared that a deadline might not be met, it was responsible for alerting both the receiving body and the author department. The Department was also interested in feedback from Member States; that was the purpose of the informational meetings, which had been scheduled twice a year and provided with interpretation. In addition, it had circulated a questionnaire to Member States in various committees to measure the degree of dissatisfaction with the performance of the Department. The Department would like to recast the questionnaire to measure the level of satisfaction, rather than dissatisfaction, and to recirculate the questionnaire later in the year. It was pointed out that the questionnaire would meet with a greater response if it were circulated in all official languages of the United Nations.

Integrated global management

11. A non-paper on the Department's project on integrated global management of conference services was circulated, giving highlights of the activities of the 2004 and 2005 task forces composed of staff from the four main duty stations. The work of the task forces was of great interest and more information was sought.

12. Representatives of conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi participated via videoconference in the Committee's 467th meeting, on 21 September, on recent developments concerning the use of eMeets and the APG software in integrated global management at their respective duty stations. The Committee was informed that the task forces established based on the recommendations of the Office of Internal Oversight Services had made great strides. The work of the task force on budget and finance, for example, had enabled conference services to develop a common budget presentation comparable across duty stations and to harmonize their budget parameters and output measures. The entire task force project and the consolidated budgeting exercise had resulted in an upsurge of consultation and interaction among duty stations.

13. The representatives of the New York, Geneva and Nairobi Offices reported that they were using eMeets for meetings scheduling; the 2006-2007 calendar for New York-based bodies was generated from the system. All four major duty stations were using the APG system for the assignment of interpreters and were striving for compatibility of all their electronic meeting and documentation management systems. The duty stations increasingly collaborated in assisting one another with new information technology as well as by loaning interpretation staff as capacity allowed. Lateral transfers of staff between the four major duty stations had also been

extended to cover the regional commissions in order to create more opportunities for mobility among language staff; such transfers were voluntary.

14. Delegations commended the Department for its efforts at global management and expressed satisfaction at the progress made. They welcomed the practical steps taken to coordinate systems and overcome the compartmentalization that had formerly characterized conference services at the four duty stations. It was noted that the concept of balanced burden-sharing among duty stations would make it possible to achieve greater synergy and better use of overall resources. Some felt, however, that the United Nations Office at Nairobi was still far short of parity with the other three major duty stations, as evidenced by its inability to make a technical presentation at the videoconference. Several delegations said that the videoconference had been of great practical use in answering their questions about integrated global management and other issues.

Conclusions

15. Delegations supported the Department's reform process and the steps it proposed to take as outlined in the report of the Secretary-General (A/60/112, para. 39), but cautioned that in its efforts the Department must not lose sight of its obligation to implement all of the instructions of the General Assembly.